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Documentaries Examine Impact of Agriculture on Environment, Us

Apr-08-2010

Last year, Illinois grew 2 billion bushels of corn -- 15 percent of the entire U.S. corn crop.

And to produce that much corn, tons of chemicals were applied to the land. Some of those chemicals are said to have ended up in rivers, lakes and oceans. Some claim that those chemicals also end up in us.

Eastern Illinois University invites community residents to join director Aaron Woolf for screenings of two of his movies, "Big River" and "King Corn," that investigate how agriculture impacts the environment and those who depend on it for food and other products.

In the 2007 Peabody-winning documentary "King Corn," Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis, best friends from college, move to the heartland to learn where their food comes from. With the help of friendly neighbors, genetically modified seeds and powerful herbicides, they plant and grow a bumper crop of America 's most-productive, most-subsidized grain on one acre of Iowa soil. But when they try to follow their pile of corn into the food system, what they find raises troubling questions about how we eat -- and how we farm.

In 2009's "Big River," Cheney and Ellis return to Iowa with a new mission: to investigate the environmental impact their acre of corn has sent to the people and places downstream. In a journey that spans from the heartland to the Gulf of Mexico, the two men trade their combine for a canoe and set out to see the world their acre of corn has touched. On their trip, flashbacks to the pesticides they sprayed, the fertilizers they injected and the soil they plowed now lead to new questions, explored by new experts in new places.

Half of Iowa's topsoil, they learn, has been washed out to sea. Fertilizer runoff has spawned a hypoxic "dead zone" in the Gulf. And back at their acre, the herbicides they used are blamed for a cancer cluster that reaches all too close to home.

Both films will be shown Wednesday, April 21, in Phipps Auditorium, located on the first floor of the Physical Science Building on the EIU campus. Admission to "Big River" and "King Corn," set to run from 3 to 4 p.m. and 5 to 7 p.m., respectively, is free and open to the public. Question-and-answer sessions with Woolf will follow each screening.

In addition, EIU's Booth Library is hosting an exhibit designed to provide more information on the films and related issues. The exhibit will be on display through the end of April in the library's Reference Hallway.

The screenings are being made possible through a College of Sciences Visiting Scholars grant, which was supplemented by Eastern's departments of geology/geography, sociology/anthropology and political science; Booth Library; and Tempestas et Caelum Productions.

Additional information about the documentaries can be found at <http://www.bigriverfilm.com/> and <http://www.kingcorn.net/>.